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ABSTRACT

A disturbing gulf between the culture of the United States and that of Singapore, was noted by an American English professor after spending the 1986-87 academic year as a Fullbright lecturer in Singapore's Department of English and Literature and again after returning for the 1991-92 academic year as a visiting professor. Cultural differences were not as disturbing during the first visit as during the second, despite a number of reforms that brought the Singapore English department into closer alignment with the American academic culture. One reason for this change in perspective may be attributed to the instructor's own heightened awareness of the importance of writing in a literature program. In a culture that places emphasis on exam writing rather than process, analytical, or discovery writing, the instructor was frustrated by the attitude students took toward their writing assignments. The situation in the Singapore English curriculum increasingly represented not simply a disagreement over pedagogical methods but the force of what can only be described as culture. Any talk of injecting a composition element into literature courses was met by practical objections to its labor intensiveness. It was also met with something more peculiarly Singaporean: a defense of the logocentric authoritarianism, which was at the heart of the literature program. The ease of crossing, whether into another person's psyche or into another culture, belies the uncanny tendency of persons and cultures to revert to what they have been, even--perhaps especially--when in the zones of contact. If this seems a gloomy way of regarding cultural differences, it is more genuinely respectful than many of the more optimistic attitudes encountered lately, and one on which an authentic cultural reapproachement might begin to be established. (TB)

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CULTURE AS CATALYST AND CONSTRAINT

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Let me begin by confessing that I feel a bit out of place here today. In terms of academic training and my teaching and publication since graduate school, I have hardly qualified as any sort of composition or writing person. This is my first CCCC presentation; indeed, this is the first CCCC meeting I have attended. Even so, it seems singularly appropriate that I reflect on my two teaching stints at the National University of Singapore in this setting, as the intervening period was marked for me by a rather intense initiation into many of the issues and concerns which have fascinated and exercised 4-Cs members for years, an initiation which profoundly affected my sense of what was happening at Singapore, as well at my home institution, and of what I was seeking at both venues.

I spent the 1986-87 academic year as a Fulbright lecturer in Singapore's Department of English Language and Literature and returned, by invitation, five years later as a Visiting Professor in the same department. What my second visit lacked in novelty, it more than compensated for in the familiarity and sense of fitting in which had resulted from my first visit. I felt immediately able to embrace again those pleasures of climate and culture which make Singapore an attractive place to live and work, as well as a pleasing worklife and colleagues and former students I had come to regard as friends.

My earlier time in Singapore had made me mindful of striking differences between it and the United States and between the academic cultures of the two societies. I remember, for example, being disturbed by the pervasively authoritarian and rules-bound atmosphere of Singaporean life yet impressed by Singapore's corruption-free government, and by its national leaders--notably Singapore's founding father and longtime Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew--sincerely dedicated to charting a future for their people--in contrast with the seeming unawareness of our leaders to what one of them would belittle as "the vision thing" when confronted by his own lack of forethought. I remember my struggle to understand and fit into a university system of lectures, tutorials and year-end

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examinations--which in my view encouraged excessive reliance upon pronouncements of lecturers and critics for literary knowledge, which recognized only performance on examinations and prohibited the kinds of continuous assessment conducive to student's self-improvement as readers and writers, and which created a pressure-cooker atmosphere as the year progressed. Only gradually did I come to appreciate how for much of the year such a system, whatever its shortcomings, freed me from the roles of examiner and grader, and permitted me to work together with my tutorial students toward a shared goal of learning. Paradoxically, the impersonality and anonymity of the system often helped create both a franker and a more mutually trusting relationship between students and teachers than what I was accustomed to. Certainly the extent to which all my Singapore department colleagues came to know the work and abilities of all English majors by the end of their final year exceeded what I had observed over many years of university teaching back home.

I mention these particular reflections I brought back with me in the summer of 1987, to suggest how I felt both good and bad about what I had seen in Singapore. Nobody returning to the United States during the Iran-Contra hearings could sustain illusions about the quality or responsibility of American government and elected leaders. And if I had seen the stereotypes of Singaporean learners as more passive and docile than their American counterparts confirmed, certainly I had seen also confirmed the positive flipside of such notions in terms of the greater industry of my Singaporean students and their reluctance to squander whatever options and freedoms their system afforded them--in marked contrast with the generally freer but generally less motivated and less productive American college students. And while I could decry the Anglophile quality of the English curriculum and much else in Singapore ("More English than England," one of my British colleagues observed ruefully), I couldn't with much confidence recommend wholesale improvements. Certainly I couldn't share the common complaint among the American

community in Singapore that things weren't the way they were back home--why should they be?

Whatever changes I might have wished for Singapore seemed, in fact, to have been set in motion by the time I returned, in the summer of 1991. The last political prisoners detained up to twenty years without charge under the notorious Internal Security Act (a legacy of British colonial rule) had been freed from the infamous Changi Prison. Censorship had been liberalized to the extent of permitting over-18 audiences to view uncut versions of films which previously would have been seriously cut (and I celebrated the new law by seeing David Lynch's "Wild at Heart" in an audience including many suspiciously young-looking Singaporeans.) Lee Kuan Yew had stepped down as Prime Minister in favor of a younger and less austere-seeming successor. The pressure of minority groups and the increasingly affluent Chinese Singaporean professional community for liberal change was felt in the election of August 1991, when not only were more opposition members elected to Parliament than ever before, but, more significantly, the opposition registered the highest popular vote ever. Neither the resulting consternation within the ruling party nor any particular government measure (certainly not the outlawing of chewing gum!) could reverse the impression that liberal change would continue.

What I saw in the English Department to which I returned seemed to mirror developments in the larger society. If I had decried the over-emphasis on British Literature, to the exclusion of virtually every other kind of writing, now there was a push toward broadening English studies. Instead of consigning American writers to a single course in the invitation-only honours year, there were to be such courses in the earlier years. Topics-based courses and literary theory were also to be added to the early-years offerings. Perhaps most important, writers from that region--India, Malaysia and even Singapore itself--would be studied in the revised first-year course. This meant that the Leavisite, practical-criticism approach to literary texts--which had made it almost impossible to encourage my students to consider how *A Passage to India* or *Heart of*

Darkness concerned their own colonial and post-colonial histories--would be giving way to at least some historicization of readings and to the consideration of the contemporary social and political problems to which they spoke.

All of these developments reflected an awakened appreciation of the need to attract students. While the department had always, so far as I could tell, treated them with fairness and with the degree of kindness that an impersonal, anonymous system of examining and marking permitted, it had seemed marvellously insulated from the need to consider students' preferences in what they studied and from the vicissitudes of enrollment.. Perhaps I had not been sufficiently aware during my first Singapore visit, or perhaps the general liberalizing of the nation had trickled down (or in) to the English Department, but it seemed that suddenly, in 1991, there was talk about declining enrollment in the department, particularly in literature, about the need to make course offerings attractive to potential majors, and about possible reduction in staff if the decline was not reversed. Market pressures were driving curricular discussion and modifications. In addition, by the time I returned to Singapore, a measure of continuous assessment had been introduced to all classes--so that the writing of essays prior the the final examination would now "count" in the calculation of grades--and a shift to an American-style calendar of two semesters was contemplated--it goes into effect this year. "More American than America," I was beginning to think.

If I was right about this, if things were moving in directions I might have wished earlier, my personal reactions were puzzling, since I would leave Singapore that second time if anything more dissatisfied than before. If I had begun to get "my way" out there--and without any strain on my part--why didn't things look and feel considerably better then than five years earlier? While a number of personal factors, even some I can't recognize, might be relevant here, one which I can recognize and discuss was a heightened awareness of writing and its importance in an English curriculum. What might have struck longtime writing professionals as axiomatic came home to me only during the 1988-89 academic

year, my second back at Drake after the initial Singapore venture, when, in a yearlong series of probably the most open discussions I have experienced in the university, we redesigned our freshman writing course. This move followed the dismantling of a doctoral program, on which we had depended for a good chunk of our English 1 staffing, and the hiring of a number of new fulltime tenure-track teachers interested in a variety of specialties but all of them dedicated to a writing-intensive curriculum and the special place of the freshman course in that curriculum, and all of them trained and active in writing theory and pedagogy as they had emerged and intersected with the radical shifts in American English Studies since the 1970s. Not that I had failed to have my students write a good deal under the old paradigms or negected to try in some fashion to teach them to write--I had done these things conscienciously for years. And not that what I had been doing hadn't readied me to take on the newer approaches to student writing--clearly it must have.

The point is that all of this hit me between my Singapore stints, so as to make me profoundly dissatisfied with even the best of American literary education as I had seen it practiced and tried to practice it myself. This wholesale exposure to the possibilities of intensive, recursive writing in a variety of forms as a medium for teaching and learning meant that my own pedagogical ante had been raised, that what I had wanted before from myself and from my students had become insufficient and, in a strange way, irrelevant, and that I would be prone to discount, or at least undervalue, improvements in the directions I had previously valued most. I say "undervalue" because the curricular changes I witnessed in Singapore during my second visit, while superficially modest in comparison to what was happening in my own department and others in the United States in the late 1980s, had been in a real sense more spectacular and more daring--given the attachment to the Brit. Lit tradition and associated ways of thinking so firmly entrenched in all levels of society there.

Of course, I couldn't know that I would be dissatisfied, for I was glad to be back. But I soon realized that even though essays written for class mattered in Singapore as never before, they didn't matter in the ways I had recently learned to value, and I had difficulty

finding opportunities to realize those new-found ways. The only opportunity I remember--and one which especially confirmed for me the wisdom of those ways and my frustration in not being able to pursue them more widely--came with my honours seminar in American literature. A lively and interested group of students, they generally took their work seriously; certainly most were well-prepared with the reading for our weekly meetings. However, they knew that even under the new scheme the paper I assigned for the end of the first term would count no more than 20% of their grade, and amid the presures of six other courses most opted, in true Singapore fashion, to take their chances on the year-end exam pulling them through. The papers I received, with a couple of exceptions, were mediocre at best. Having expected to take whatever lumps I meted out and to proceed with the second term's work, with first-term papers a thing of the past, they were suprised at my announcing upon our reconvening at mid-year that the grade I had given each paper was contingent upon it being considerably revised--otherwise it would be recorded as not having been completed. There was grumbling, there was resistence, but, again in traditional Singapore fashion, there was compliance and ultimately, in almost every case, a markedly stronger paper and evidence of significant further engagement with the topic and relevant texts.

My sense of the restraint placed upon injecting writing into the curriculum was compounded when I noticed that the single writing course in the entire English Language and Literature curriculum--the Applied English Discourse offering in department's language side, which had been initiated during my first year in Singapore and maintained with difficulty since--had made so little headway. Any talk of its being expanded or of injecting a "composition" element into literature courses was met by practical objections to its labor-intensiveness. In this complaint, the workaholic Singapore culture and its more laidback American counterpart seemed to find common ground. But, I detected something else, something more peculiarly Singaporean in the response of my department colleagues: a defense of the logocentric authoritarianism at the heart of their literature curriculum. To

deviate from tutorial essays designed merely as warmups for exam-taking, to induce a degree of reflexivity into the writing process itself and to allow revision, might overly complicate--and even preclude--throughtful students from producing the kinds of exam papers traditionally expected of them. And certainly it might threaten the relatively unreflexive marking which had been the norm.

The situation of writing in the Singapore English curriculum increasingly represented to me not simply a disagreement over pedagogical methods but the force of what I can only label "culture." I had the intuition that I was up against something much larger than than an attitude toward pedagogical practice, something connected with all sorts of other practices and attitudes permeating the society. Even in changes I applauded, things weren't going "my way" at all, but a way stamped with the approval of the local culture and subject to its constraints. Where many of my students had complained of living in a cultural limbo--prevented by the newness of their nation and the instability of postmodern life from finding a satisfactory alternative to the Chinese roots from which they had been cut off --I now sensed the reality of a Singaporean culture: not merely a blend of East and West--or, more specifically, of Chinese, British and American ingredients--but a way of situating oneself that included the political and social past, the commercial and geographic present, and likely future developments. Where Americans or Britons might recognize twisted versions of institutions familiar to them--or a Chinese-American acquaintance might amuse me by observing that the Singapore university system combined the worst features of the British army and the Chinese civil service--in the end I had to conclude that any outsider was up against a cultural force largely unrecognizable and impenetrable, and likely to have things its way--and not simply through military or legal control. I even caught myself reconsidering Lee Kuan Yew's claim that western-style rights and liberties might not be appropriate for a confucian culture--a claim I had tended to dismiss contemptuously as merely self-serving.

Seen in this light, the changes I was observing seemed less important than the cultural filters through which they were being permitted. Even if intradepartmental factions and squabbles--which I found in as great abundance in Singapore as back home--might be seen as part of an international "culture of academe," the differences between the styles of squabbling and between the issues being contested defined the differences between the larger cultures of the two societies. Certainly the very processes of reform--in curriculum, in classroom practices, in department policies--both in the U.S. and Singapore confirmed the subtle but powerful tug of culture informing those most radical, anti-traditionalist gestures bent on altering culture.

And if I imagined myself far away from home somehow escaping my own culture's constraints, the reality hit me in a course evaluation, where one of my Singaporean students described my lectures on Tennyson and Arnold as "Very American." By this point a sense of fatality had set in: Singapore and its university were not going to be Americanized but only Singaporized in a new manner, and I was not going to be Singaporized. If I had developed a more demanding sense of how things ought to be than when I concluded my first visit, I was not about to concede my convictions to any abstract notion of fair play or cultural relativism. For all of my good will toward the society and especially toward people with whom I had worked, and for all of my sense that the mistakes of cultural superiority informing colonialism ought not to be repeated--and even for all of the imperfections I noted when seeing my convictions at work back home--I came away feeling that in some fundamental ways I was right, and that many of the practices I had observed out there--in the uses of writing, in the lecture system, in the types of examination and evaluation--were mistaken. No longer could I muster the benign tolerance I had felt five years earlier.

Raymond Williams has described the term "culture" as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language"(*Keywords*, 87). Certainly I wonder, as never before, what it means to understand, to tolerate or to accept another culture. Must I approve? And can I truly "understand" another culture without shedding my own? And is

that possible or even necessarily desirable? My uncertainty has, of course, been colored by that young American Michael Fay's misfortunes during the past year--an episode about which I have mixed feelings. It caused many of my acquaintences who had little idea where or what Singapore was, and even less interest in my having been there, to seek me out and ask in horrified fascination, "Is it really like that over there?" Invariably I had to respond that, yes, it is like that--without clarifying precisely what "that" is or whether it was all "that" horrible. Certainly my Drake freshman students thought so when the Fay case came up in our discussion of Foucault. My desire to complicate their ethnocentricity was satisfied nicely by the only non-American in the group, a Nigerian who described and defended caning as he had experienced it, pronounced it superior to our ways of disciplining and punishing, and added, "You Americans are so confusing in what you do."

My own confusion centers on what I experienced in Singapore and how I feel about it. My former way of responding to this sort of thing--a way sanctioned by the era in which I came of political age, and by values which seemed to improve on the conservatism of the various presidential epochs (from Truman's through Johnson's), and a way which still has its attractions--seems especially inadequate in this context. I am reminded of the comfort I used to take from that staple of earlier composition readers, George Orwell's "On Shooting an Elephant." You remember the story, where the English policeman in Burma finds himself forced, out of the desire to save face with the locals and against his better judgement,to shoot an elephant His recognition of the powerlessness his empowering position brought him, his conclusion that "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys," seemed to me a parable for all persons in positions of dominance and for all tyrannical power-plays. But now I'm much less certain of the bridging of situations, of consciousnesses, and of cultures which it seems to suggest. Would a Lee Kuan Yew sense--or even care about--the loss of freedom Orwell describes? Would the celebrated European colonials or even an Englishman other than George Orwell necessarily agonize in this fashion? And if we consider recent suggestions that Orwell, in

fact, may never have found himself forced to shoot an elephant, does the conclusion he reaches here not seem especially presumptuous?

The ease of crossing which Orwell implies--whether into another person's psyche or into another culture--belies the uncanny tendency of persons and cultures to revert to what they have been, even--perhaps especially--when in the zones of contact. If this seems a gloomy way of regarding cultural differences, it strikes me as more genuinely respectful than many of the more optimisic attitudes encountered lately, and one on which an authentic cultural rapproachement might begin to be established.

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